WOMEN AND ENVIRONMENT: "PARTNERS IN LIFE"

The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), scheduled for 1-12 June 1992 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, is a milestone meeting. The "Earth Summit", the first legally mandated global summit, will bring together top echelon policy makers as well as grass-roots activists from virtually every country in the world. Women will be there too.

Women, representing more than 50 per cent of the world's population, are affected by—and can themselves affect—every topic being addressed at UNCED: from population to biodiversity to climate change to technology transfer to economic formulations. Women are not only a precious, though often unappreciated human resource; they are also a vital link in protecting the environment and sustaining development.

Women and the environment are truly "partners in life". Their voices and their visions must be heard and heeded.

WOMEN: GENIES OF GRASSROOTS INGENUITY

Thailand: At first glance, petite Tuenjai Deetes seems unlikely to have started a self-help farming movement in Thailand. But when she speaks, her energy and quiet determination reveal what motivated the founder of the Hill Area Development Foundation (HADF). For decades, she explains, hill tribes from Myanmar (formerly Burma) have been fleeing difficult conditions, settling along the borders of Thailand. Overcrowding in the areas they inhabit, slash-and-burn agriculture, and cash-cropping had resulted in poor food crops, forcing people to abandon the barren land and migrate to more fertile soil. Working with hill tribes in seven villages, HADF helped apply integrated farming, "alley cropping" and "sloping land agriculture technologies", and now the horizontal contours of the land are rich with crops, bushes and trees. Says a smiling Tuenjai Deetes, "The programme's success hinged on women's participation."

Brazil: Lack of industry accountability drove Tania Tavares of Brazil to organize students and scientists to research problems, develop data and guide local authorities toward necessary action. As a result of the work done by the University of Bahia group, a lead metallurgy plant which had been operating without proper emission controls has had to adopt more environmentally responsible emissions guidelines. The plant has also had to be responsible for the medical needs of the affected population, ultimately lowering the lead and cadmium levels discharged into the community.

Nigeria: When Grace Faoye of Nigeria was a child, her job was to fetch the firewood. "I told my mother that when I grew up, I would find a way not to have to fetch the wood." It was a promise she kept. Faoye designed a gas stove using local technology and available materials. She took her design to a local metal worker and the rest, as they say, is history. More than 1,000 stoves have been sold since production was started in 1988. Women using the stoves have substantially reduced the amount of firewood consumed for cooking, and consequently, the time it takes to gather the wood.

WOMEN'S GLOBAL ASSEMBLY: CATALYZING A NEW CONSCIOUSNESS

The "success stories" of Deetes, Tavares and Faoye were among 218 such examples of women's natural ability as resource managers shared at the "Global Assembly of Women and the Environment: Partners in Life," held in Miami, Florida in November 1991. According to its organizers—the Senior Women's Advisory Group (SWAG) of the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) and WorldWIDE Network, a Washington, D.C.-based non-profit organization of women in environment—the Assembly was the first international gathering of women to discuss the environment. It drew over 500 participants from over 70 countries and was designed to demonstrate to the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) and to the world community that "women, as a result of their experiences, roles and skills, have specific and valuable contributions to make to environment and development issues now being tackled by governments and the UN".

UNITED NATIONS

The Assembly, characterized not as a conference but as an ongoing "process", represented the culmination of a series of four UNEP-sponsored regional assemblies of women and environment. They were held in Zimbabwe, Tunisia, Thailand, and Ecuador by the women of Africa, West Asia/Arab World, Asia/Pacific, and Latin America/Caribbean between February 1989 and March 1991. Through the experiences brought to bear at each of these convocations, women's capacity in environmental management, the elements of leadership necessary for success, and the policies which could advance, or which retard, such efforts were illustrated.

WOMEN'S INNOVATIVE "SUCCESS STORIES"

Success stories at the Assembly focused on the areas of environmentally-friendly systems, products and technologies; water; energy, especially as it relates to climate change; and waste. Selected projects had to be *repeatable, affordable, sustainable,* and *visible*. They demonstrated that environmental degradation was averted or repaired, and they highlighted women's leadership and participation. The focus was decidedly that the grassroots level was where the work must start, said Helena Benitez, SWAG member and Rapporteur-General of the Assembly. "We must begin with the small ecosystems and that means at the local level," she stated. "We [women] must do our homework and bring pressure to bear at all levels."

In background papers and presentations relating to UNCED and the Assembly's four topics, key points were made to which women can readily relate. For example:

Water: For hundreds of millions of women living in developing countries, the quality of their environment lies firstly in what they are offered as drinking water. . . The majority of women in the Third World, particularly women living in rural areas, must spend an important part of their daily lives fetching the water needed by their communities for drinking, cooking, cleaning, caring for children and the elderly and washing clothes. That is why, in June 1992 when the developed countries are pondering the state of the global environment in terms of destruction of the ozone layer and climate change, hundreds of millions of women in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean will be concerned about how to satisfy their needs for water.

Aminata Traore
PROWESS–Africa, UNDP

Energy: "Because women's time and energy are finite quantities, planners of energy projects should have a good understanding of how these quantities are used before embarking on detailed project design. If we accept, as it has been written, that 'the real energy crisis is women's time' (Tinker, 1987), one of the main criteria to judge the merits of an energy project should be whether it will enable women to use their time in the best manner. More than one energy project has produced disappointing results because it failed to recognize women's priorities."

Maurizia Tovo, Sociologist
The World Bank

Waste: "We must develop an ecocentric perspective as we proceed on the road to sustainable development. We urgently need to advance the industrial revolution by moving towards 'clean technologies.' The inability of the manufacturing processes to detoxify their products has created the waste crisis. The other action that is urgently required is for the environmentalists to work in close collaboration with the industrial/manufacturing sector to determine the long-term ecological impact of a particular product or process prior to its mass production."

Beverly A. Miller
UNEP/Caribbean Environment Programme

Environmentally friendly systems: "We need to change our consumption and production patterns themselves. Preventing pollution, so that it doesn't become transferred from water to air to land and back again, is more environmentally and cost effective than end-of-pipe treatments. What we really need are processes and products which are designed to save on energy and raw material resources while at the same time prevent waste and

pollution, from the moment they are conceived and designed, through production, up until their components are returned to the environment."

Jacqueline Aloisi de Larderel
UNEP/Industry & Environment

NETWORKING WITH MENTORS AND NEW GENERATION LEADERS

A once-only success story is not enough. As mentioned earlier, the Global Assembly conveners insisted that selected projects had to fulfil the criteria of being *affordable, sustainable, visible* and *repeatable*. For this kind of ripple effect to be successful in itself, networking is necessary. But networking alone is also not enough. The key lies in bringing success stories to the attention of policy makers and those working on meeting human needs, to show them that innovative and workable solutions are economically feasible and environmentally sustainable.

Therefore, in addition to success story presenters, Global Assembly participants included "Mentors" and "New Generation Leaders." The Mentor Groups comprised representatives from academia, corporations, foundations, governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), international and regional institutions such as development banks, donor agencies and UN agencies and the media. Their mandate was to assess how their respective organizations could advance the replication of such successful projects, and to consider whether new or revised guidelines were necessary to promote women in environmental management activities. In their general recommendations at the conclusion of the Assembly, the Mentor Groups agreed to "ensure that the contributions of women in achieving sustainable development will be utilized by their involvement in decision-making and implementation of environmental programmes at all levels."

The 49 New Generation Leaders who attended the Assembly represented young people between the ages of 18 and 25 years. They were invited to participate in order to gain exposure to women/environment/development issues, and to advance their generation in promoting sustainable development. Lydia Alpizar of Costa Rica and Njoki Njehu of Kenya were among them. "It is good that they opened up space for us," said Alpizar, who is involved in organizing an international conference for youth. "We can learn from each other." Njehu, who is affiliated with Kenya's Green Belt Movement, said that, among the many emotions she felt at the Assembly, most memorable were those of "inspiration and hope for the future."

ALL ROADS LEAD TO RIO: THE EARTH SUMMIT AND AGENDA 21

Deliberations at the "Earth Summit" in Brazil are likely to center around "Agenda 21", a detailed blueprint for action to be taken all the way into the twenty-first century by Governments, development agencies and United Nations organizations, as well as by independent sectors—in fact, in all areas where human and economic activity affect the environment.

In preparation for the Earth Summit, the recommendations of the Global Assembly have been conveyed to heads of U.N. agencies, governments and mentor institutions who will influence the outcome of Agenda 21. They point out that the Third Preparatory Committee of UNCED called for the effective participation of women in knowledge generation, decision-making and management at local, national, regional and international levels.

The Assembly's report, among other recommendations, calls for the heads of governments to sign binding conventions on climate change and biodiversity; to reach agreement on principles on the world's forests; and to assure that the Earth Charter includes both men and women in its rights and obligations.

With respect to its four priority areas of water, waste, energy and environmentally-friendly systems, the Assembly's recommendations urge that governments design policies for environmental management with maximum decentralization of authority and assignment of adequate public resources; that they evaluate energy policies in terms of total energy systems, including microsystems managed by women; that they give priority in the allocation and protection of water sup-

plies to the needs of people over other uses; and that they protect environmentally-friendly systems.

BRAZIL AND BEYOND:

"The importance of the Assembly process was that it confirmed the capacities of women to advance environmental management in ways that benefit public health, food security, energy efficiency, education and appropriate technology. Local solutions help solve global problems" said Joan Martin-Brown, Director of UNEP's Washington Office and Assembly Coordinator.

If we intend to exert greater influence for legal, social and political change, "we must not view the world as North/South, East/West. We must view the world as an array of ecosystems, each with different capacities. Women understand and appreciate these differences", added Martin-Brown.

The Global Assembly recommendations point out that "too few women have been involved in decision-making with regard to policies, programmes, projects or funding for the environment, despite the international target of 30 percent of women in leadership positions by 1995, and equal representation between women and men by the year 2000. . . We insist that the perceptions and priorities of women be fully reflected in Agenda 21," the document goes on to say. "We urge the United Nations and their agencies to support these recommendations."

In the words of Dr. Mostafa K. Tolba, Executive Director of UNEP and Under-Secretary-General of the UN, "women must stand united and resolve to carry the day in Rio and beyond".

GLOBAL ASSEMBLY MANDATE TO GOVERNMENTS FOR THE UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE ON ENVIRONMENT AND DEVELOPMENT

In their Summary Statement at the conclusion of the conference, delegates of the Global Assembly stated that they:

► Expected Heads of Governments to:
—Sign binding conventions on climate change and biodiversity;
—Reach an agreement on principles on the World Forests;
—Assure that the Earth Charter includes men and women in the charter's rights and obligations;
—Approve a Programme of Action on Sustainable Development in which all sectors of society plan an active role;
—Ensure that resources and the free flow of environmentally-friendly technology are available to men and women to implement Agenda 21.
► Insisted that the perceptions and priorities of women be fully reflected in Agenda 21; and
► Urged the United Nations and their agencies to support the Global Assembly's recommendations.

Documentation, including regional strategies and action plans, commitments by Mentor Groups, New Generation Leaders and the Media are also included in the Assembly's final document which may be obtained from:

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